

## Social Media and Safer Communications Policies

Draft

The following recommended practices and guidelines apply lessons from commonly accepted principles of healthy boundaries to the virtual world of digital media and communication.

In the pages that follow, you will find information on social media sites and groups and recommended practices for interacting on each, plus information about behavioral covenants, video chats, blogs, video blogs, emailing, text messaging and tweeting.

### Commonly Accepted Principles of Healthy Boundaries and Safeguarding All People

1. Adults have more power than children and youth.
2. Ministers have more power than people with whom they have a pastoral relationship.
3. The mutuality of friendship cannot exist when there is a disparity of power.
4. Two unrelated adults must be able to maintain visual contact with each other any time they engage in ministry with children or youth.
5. Windows in doors allow transparency of interactions with children, youth and adults who may be vulnerable.

### General Information about Digital Communications

1. All communications sent digitally (i.e. email, messages on social media sites, notes or posts, etc.) are **not confidential** and may be shared or reposted to others.
2. Interactions in the virtual world need to be transparent, just as a window in the door provides transparency in the physical world.
3. In the virtual world, healthy boundaries and practices must be adhered to as they are in the physical world.
4. In the virtual world, “friend” can mean anyone with whom you are willing to communicate with through that medium. In the physical world, “friend” can mean much more in terms of intimacy, self- disclosure, mutuality and expectations for relationship.
5. Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse/neglect/exploitation of children, youth, elders and vulnerable adults apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world.
6. Everything you post online is public and a part of your witness.
7. Ministers, especially, should not post if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

## **Recommended Practices for Interactions with Children and Youth**

### ***Relationships on Social Media Sites***

1. Adults who minister to children and youth are strongly encouraged to set stringent privacy settings on any social media profile, or to only post things they feel comfortable sharing with the youth to whom they minister. Individual personal profiles are to be used to interact with real friends, family and peers. Adults should not submit friend requests to minors or youth. Youth may not be able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults. Youth may ask to be friends and adults should discern the level of contact they want to maintain with youth prior to responding to these requests.
2. If an adult chooses to accept friend requests from minors or youth who are associated with their faith community, other adult leaders must have full access to all aspects of that adult's profile and correspondence.
3. Adults who want to connect via a social media website with youth to whom they minister may want to set up a closed group account that youth may join. Youth requesting to friend an adult can then be invited to join this group rather than be accepted as a friend on an adult's personal profile account. The purpose of this is to create a line of privacy between youth and one's family, friends and colleagues. Alternatively, the DRE could also post only that which he or she feels comfortable sharing with the youth to whom he or she ministers.
4. Any material on any site (whether church affiliated or not) that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to the clergy and/or the Child Protective Services. If the material is on a church affiliated site, that material should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with CPS and/or the police. To find the hotline in your area: <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/pg93.htm>.

### ***Groups on Social Media Sites***

1. Groups should have at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth.
2. Closed groups, but not hidden groups, should be used for youth groups.
3. Invitations to youth to join the group should be made by youth administrators, unless a youth previously asked an adult administrator to invite another youth to join the group.
4. Behavioral covenants should be created to govern what content is appropriate and inappropriate for an online youth group.
5. Any material on any site (whether affiliated with the church or not) that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to the clergy and/or CPS. If the material is on a church affiliated site, that material should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with CPS and/or police.

6. Inappropriate material that does not raise suspicion that a child as been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should immediately be removed from the site.
7. Any content that details inappropriate behavior, which is outside of the bounds of the established behavioral covenant, during a church sponsored event or activity should be addressed by adult youth leaders and parents.
8. Social media groups for youth should be open to parents of current members.
9. Parents should be informed that the content of youth pages or groups that are not sponsored by the church are not within the purview of adult youth leaders.
10. Adult leaders of youth groups and former youth members who, due to departure, removal from position, or those who are no longer eligible because they aged-out of a program, should be removed from digital communication with youth groups via social media sites, list services, etc. In some cases, the discretion of the DRE must be trusted in this area.

## **Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Interactions with Adults**

### ***Relationships on Social Media Sites***

1. Ministers are strongly encouraged to set stringent privacy settings on any social media profile to shield both adult and youth members from viewing content that may be inappropriate. Or, they may have the mindset that they will only post that which they feel comfortable sharing with their whole congregation on a Sunday morning.
2. Individual personal profiles of clergy are to be used to interact with friends, family and peers. Ministers should not submit friend requests to parishioners and others to whom they minister. The disparity of power may not give the other person the ability to decline such request.
3. Ministers who want to connect via a social media website with parishioners are encouraged to set up a group account that all parishioners may join. The purpose of having a personal profile and parish group is to create a line of privacy between parishioners and family, friends and colleagues. They may also only post that which they are comfortable sharing publicly with congregants.
4. Ministers should consider the impact of declining a friend request from parishioners. These encounters may create a tension in real world relationships. They can direct friend requests from parishioners to the parish's group page.
5. Ministers who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church sponsored digital communications groups to maintain contact with youth members.
6. When a minister's ministry at a congregation or other ministry setting ends, the minister should remove parishioners as friends or contacts in all forms of digital communications whenever possible.
7. Ministers should make use of private messages for matters that should be discussed privately.

8. All individuals relating to one another on the church Facebook page should behave in the same way as they would during a fellowship moment at church. The atmosphere should be friendly, kind and safe. If anyone fails to maintain that friendly spirit, he/she will be asked to leave. Opinions are welcome, but nastiness is not.

## **Recommendations for Digital Communications and Content**

### ***Behavioral Covenants***

1. Covenants should acknowledge that materials posted on church sponsored sites and/or group pages are not confidential.
2. Covenants should acknowledge that content deemed inappropriate will be removed from the site or group page.
3. Covenants for communities of faith should address the following issues:
  - Appropriate language
  - Eligibility of membership to join a social media group. Things to consider include whether you have to be a member of a parish or youth group and whether there are age requirements.
  - Loss of eligibility of membership and removal from the social media group. Consider how and when members will be removed from the group due to moving away, leaving the faith community, becoming too old for youth group, clergy leaving to minister to another parish or exclusion from ministry positions for other reasons.
  - Who, how and when photos may be tagged with members identified by name. One suggestion is for individuals to tag themselves in photos, but not to tag others.
  - Appropriate and inappropriate behavior of members, such as bullying, posting or sharing pictures that depict abuse, violence, sexual acts, etc., and the consequence for inappropriate behavior.
  - Compliance with mandated reporting laws regarding suspected abuse.

### **Recommendations for Video Chats, Blogs or Video Blogs**

1. Adults should refrain from initiating video chats with youth.
2. Participants in a video chat or blog should consider what will be shown in the video such as their surroundings, their clothing, state of dress, etc.
3. All transcripts of online text chats, video chats, blogs or video blogs should be saved when possible.
4. All ministers and adults engaged in ministry with youth should consider the content and nature of any post that will be read by or visible to youth. The voice of DREs and clergy is often considered the voice of the church.

## **Recommendations for Publishing/Posting Content Online**

1. Congregations must inform participants when they are being recorded on video because church buildings are not considered public space.
2. Any faith community that distributes video of its worship services or activities on the web or via other broadcast media must post signs that indicate the service will be broadcast.
3. All communities of faith should take care to secure signed Media Release forms from adults and guardians of minor children who will, or may, participate in activities that may be photographed or videoed for distribution.
4. Photos that are published on church-sponsored sites should not include names or contact information for persons under 18.

## **Recommendations for Use of Email, Text Messaging & Twitter**

1. Email can be an appropriate and effective means of communicating basic factual information such as the time of an event, agenda for a meeting, text of a document, etc.
2. Email may not be an appropriate communication method for matters that are pastorally or legally sensitive, emotionally charged or require extensive conversation.
3. If an email message is longer than a couple of paragraphs, then the matter might more properly be addressed via live conversation.
4. Humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted in an email.
5. Take a moment to consider the ramifications of their message before clicking on the “send” or “reply all” button.

## **In Conclusion**

- ***Remember, if you don't want it published on the front page of the local paper, don't write it or post it.***
- If you have any inkling that what you're about to post may be questionable to anyone, don't post it.
- Use social media responsibly to build friendships and share our principles. Use your common sense.
- If you have questions or concerns, contact the Board of Directors or the Minister.